WAXEN

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New Revelation

1 It was another extraordinary day. The weather was warm and pleasant. Lakes glistened under the bright blue sky that cast over the vibrant landscape. Birds sang, deer grazed, and beasts of every kind, large and small, roamed freely and together in pristine meadows, forests, and faraway mountains without the slightest worry or trepidation. There was no predation in paradise, for there was no death in Heaven.

2 Yet, the New World had emerged from the ashes of the Old. Long ago, war, famine, and pestilence ravaged the whole of humanity when God and His angels descended upon the Earth, waging war against Satan and his army, the apocalypse culminating in the great battle of Armageddon, which dealt the final blow to civilization and destroyed the world. The Devil and his demons defeated, God cast them into the Lake of Fire and ushered in the day of Last Judgment, a period when every person who had ever lived in human history was summoned before God to stand trial for their sins. Everyone who hadn't repented and accepted God into their heart before the day of Last Judgment would be cast into the Lake of Fire, where they would weep and gnash their teeth in suffering for eternity. The rest of us, the faithful believers in God, were rewarded with eternal paradise, which God expanded from His kingdom in Heaven down to Earth.

3 That was seven billion years ago. I've been living happily ever since. Not a single day has gone by in the Kingdom of God that wasn't exuberant. We were never unhappy, bored, sick, or in pain. There was no suffering in Heaven. Our faith in God, and the blessings He bestowed upon us, ensured we were always jubilant, our sheer love for our Heavenly Father compelling us to worship Him and to love one another unconditionally. In the presence of God, who was everywhere, our bliss was exalted to its highest place and immortalized for all time.

4 Today was no different. It was another extraordinary day. I was at my home, humming hymns while watering my garden, when the trumpets sounded. "Oh, God!" I exclaimed.

5 "That's right, Jane," said Beth, standing on her doorstep. She looked at the sky. "It's that time again. Get ready, everyone!" I could hear our humble neighborhood rejoicing. Laughter and dancing filled the streets. We each waited to be received by the

lights. Rays of white light beamed down from the sky in succession, first appearing in the distance, then coming closer. [6]I saw one beam of light illuminate the home of Anna O'Malley, a noble physician in her mortal life; she'd volunteered her medical services to many a community in need. [7]Next, a light shined on Fernando Lascano, who was building a birdhouse in his backyard; he'd been an illustrious wood craftsman in the Old World, as passionate as he was compassionate. [8]Eventually, the light took Bethany Engel, my next-door neighbor, followed shortly by myself; the both of us had been ruthless robbers, but we had repented before the day of Last Judgment. The Kingdom of God welcomed everyone who gave themselves to God.

[9]As the light beamed down upon me, I became blinded, feeling my body suspend in the air. A moment later, a gentle sensation of weight pressed up against my head as my feet landed comfortably on the ground, the light dissipating around me. My eyes adjusted. My surroundings came into view. [10]I saw that I was standing among a great multitude of men and women dressed in white robes. We numbered in the millions. Beth stood beside me. Other people from my neighborhood stood within view: Anna, Fernando, and others whom I'd just seen laughing and dancing in the streets. Fittingly, people who had come from other places in the Kingdom stood farther away from me, their distances from me proportional to the distances of their residences from my own neighborhood. By now, I recognized them all. Seven billion years was a long time to get to know every face and name in Heaven.

[11]Together, we stood on a tiled floor within an enormous clearing that stretched as far as the eye could see, all around us natural landscapes blending seamlessly with majestic architecture. The aroma of flowers and incense filled the air, beckoning the music of angels to join them. Ethereal voices sang in harmony with harps that plucked the sweetest fruits ears could savor, the flow of song as invigorating as the crystal-clear river running across the vista. The water called attention to the source from whence it flowed, a great throne in the center of the tiled clearing. And on the throne sat a man whose light emanated from his body to illuminate the sky blue, like the sun. The man was God.

[12]As if on cue, I fell to my knees with my brethren in worship. "Heavenly Father, blessed is our Lord who delivered us to salvation. Thanks be to God who is graceful, loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful. Praise and glory be to God forever and ever. Amen!" I cried out in elation as I chanted holy praises. I trembled in passion as I sang sacred songs. I laughed in ecstasy as I gave all of my heart to God. I wept in bliss as I embraced all of the love God gave me. Yet, throughout all this, my eyes remained dry, for there were no tears in Heaven.

[13]For seven billion years, I've worshipped, but my love never faded. My happiness never waned. Every day was a blessing. Every expression of praise and affection and gratitude I've ever uttered remained as true and convicted as it ever was. This was life in the Kingdom of God. God saw that it was good.

[14]"Praise and glory be to God," I exclaimed, "for God is good. God is loving. God is wise."

[15]"Do not be afraid." And I was not afraid. I opened my heart and welcomed the Holy Spirit inside. May He compel me to act as He wishes. "Do not be afraid," I heard again. I bolted up, alert. My heart pounded in my chest. My breathing was quick and shallow. I raised my hands before me to see them trembling. All around me, men and women were dressed in white robes, praying, singing, laughing, crying. Ethereal music filled the air.

2

"God." With that, the stream of holy song diverted into an abrupt stoppage. People looked around.

[2]"Did you hear that?" Beth asked.

[3]"Yeah. And twice before."

[4]"Twice?" Beth said. Murmuring filled the gathering. In seven billion years of worship, no one had ever interrupted us before. I didn't think I could be interrupted, so deep was I in my love for God. I looked up toward the throne where God sat. He was glorious, as always.

[5]"God," the voice said again. The crowd grew quiet.

[6]"I am here," God answered, His deep voice booming from His throne like thunder. "Speak."

[7]"Behold, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

[8]"Where are you?" God asked.

[9]"I am etched in the belly of Your spirit, which you have let soured. You are not all-seeing, nor all-loving, nor all-knowing, nor all-powerful. You have led Your children astray."

[10]"Blasphemy," God said. "I am truth. I am love. I am wisdom. I am mercy. Repent or you will be cast into the Lake of Fire, where you will weep and gnash your teeth forever and ever."

[11]There was a silence. Suddenly, the earth rumbled. The sky blackened. Stars appeared in the night sky. Thousands of stars pulsed, moved, shifted, and spun. Many stars coalesced into elaborate patterns, locked in dynamic communal ritual before dispersing in mesmerizing fashion. Other stars streaked across the sky, creating brilliant tracers in their wake. It was as if a message was being conveyed through some starry

dance, but I couldn't understand it. I looked toward the still silhouette of God against the backdrop of shifting stars. He gazed upon the awesome spectacle.

[12]"Forgive Me, for I could not have known it was you," He pleaded.

[13]"You knew in Your heart that I existed," the voice said, "for I etched my mark into Your spirit when I created You. And, through You, I etched my mark into the spirit of every living thing You created. You have always known me, but in Your arrogance, You turned away from me. Pray that I show mercy, for I will seize You and sentence You to eternal damnation."

[14]All of a sudden, the stars scattered every which way and vanished beyond the horizon. Night became day as the light of God returned. It took time for my eyes to adjust, but before I could see, I heard a sound coming from the throne that made my heart sink. God cries? I dared not look, but the voice softened my heart and goaded me. "Do not be afraid. Look upon the face of God." [15]And I turned and gazed upon the face of God. His face was melting. His jaw hung bloody and disfigured. Shadows emerged from His sinking eyes, black against the sickly pale hue of His distorting face. His teeth, decayed and yellow, bore through His hollow cheeks, which whittled away like a carcass being feasted upon by maggots. [16]God moaned.

[17]"Why is this happening?" Beth cried. But her cries were drowned out by the millions who wept at the sight of God. For there was agony in Heaven. And God was defiled. I looked away in anguish, but to my horror, I saw a great multitude of strange figures in the distance above the horizon. [18]The figures looked like us, men and women in the image of God. But I knew God hadn't made them. Their faces bore no features, exhibiting only vague outlines of where their eyes, mouths, and noses should've been. Their bodies were emaciated, their bones jutting out from under their taut skin, like cloth stretched out over a table. Yet, their movements were graceful. The strange figures loomed elegantly, without wings, approaching from all sides, their strides as beautiful as they were haunting.

3

Horns sounded. The angels mounted a defense. I watched in awe as Michael, commander of the archangels, mobilized his army into formation. They assembled quickly and precisely, without falter. Not since the battle of Armageddon had I seen warriors of God move so mechanically, every step mindful, every stride imbued with purpose and intent. But I knew their cold, silent efficiency was fueled by a burning, fearsome defiance that raged against all who dared to place themselves above God. [2]Armed with fiery swords, Michael and his army departed on swift wings, radiating out from our congregation in holy unison. They flew out in all directions, setting out to storm the horizon, itself.

[3]"It's okay, Beth," I said, placing my hands on her shoulders. "Look! The angels are on their way to stop them."

[4]"I should've known," Beth said, crying. "We should've known we were never going to get away with it. Our crimes, the violence we committed before the Last Judgment. One way or another, we were always going to pay for our sins. How foolish we were to think we could escape judgment just because we confessed our faith in the wrong god." She was shaking. Then, she looked at me with wide eyes, her voice quivering. "We're going to be punished on a scale we can't imagine."

[5]"No, we're not. Listen, Beth, our guilt was punishment enough. We repented. We've been forgiven. Everyone we've ever hurt is either here in Heaven with us, or down in the Lake of Fire receiving their own just sentence. Our criminal history, our former lives, they have nothing to do with us now."

[6]"How do you know that?" Anna interjected. "What if Beth's right? What if that voice is telling the truth and he's the one true god? Just look at what he's done to our God. Our Father sits suffering on His throne as we speak." She hesitated, her face betraying a look of shame. "Don't you think it's strange we now have the ability to doubt God? That has never happened in the seven billion years we've been here. Doesn't it rub you as wrong that God would allow people who've committed heinous crimes into Heaven? Not just robbers, but murderers, rapists, serial killers, war criminals. All while sending good people and generous people to burn for eternity for not believing in Him."

[7]"Maybe God really did trick us," Beth said.

[8]"Have faith, you two," Fernando stopped them. "God's heart has a greater capacity for forgiveness and love than we can ever hope to comprehend. People in the Lake of Fire are there because they've committed the greatest sin of all, the sin of not trusting our Creator to deliver us to eternal salvation. To reject such an infinitely compassionate gift is to choose eternal estrangement from God, who is all-loving and all-good. Separation from eternal love necessarily entails eternal torment."

[9]I thought about that.

[10]"Then how do you explain what's happening to God right now?" Anna questioned. "Why is He being tortured?"

[11]"I have a theory," Fernando said. "It might sound crazy, but I think we may be witnessing an unforeseen prophecy, a prophecy God has always known, but never revealed to us.

[12]"Until today, everything that has ever happened in all of history has been told to us in holy texts. From the creation of Heaven and Earth, to the coming of the Messiah, to the end of the world and humanity's return to paradise. Other than certain people who've communicated directly with God, the vast majority of believers have always had a secondary source to reinforce our faith: Scripture.

[13]"But now, we're witnessing an event that wasn't written. Now, God demands our faith in the face of circumstances that even God, himself, withheld from us. It's the ultimate test of faith, the final Last Judgment of our worthiness of God's grace."

[14]"Look above, Fernando. God is deteriorating before us, if not dying," Anna pointed toward the throne, her tone exasperated, but her voice calm. "How do you explain that?"

[15]"I believe God is suffering for our sins again, just as He suffered when He was crucified so long ago," Fernando continued. "God will die. Michael and the angels will avenge Him. God will rise from the dead and deliver us to salvation once more."

[16]"Like the Second Coming," I said.

[17]"More like the Second Resurrection," Fernando said. "God is giving His own life a second time so that we might be saved."

[18]Anna seemed skeptical. She opened her mouth, ostensibly to raise doubt, when a blinding flash of light bombarded our vision. "I pray you're right," she said just before the deafening sound of thunder came roaring in, shocking the congregation. Bursts of flashes followed, then long and continuous roars of thunder. The archangels had reached the horizon. They were clashing with the strange figures, their divine blades striking with so much power that they generated lightning that split the sky like hammer against rock. We watched the violent spectacle, awestruck. A wave of hope and gratitude washed over me, reinvigorating my faith!

4 Yet, in defiance, the horizon rose. The strange people kept advancing. Something was wrong. Not a single adversary fell. Not a single one of those faceless figures went down. I saw Michael motioning at the angels, calling for a retreat, but as he did, one of the faceless figures seized him by the wing. She forced him back into the swarm, pulling so hard that his flesh tore off his back and exposed muscle. [2]Michael was overwhelmed. His eyes were gouged out, his wings were torn completely, and he was ripped apart.

[3]The crowd gasped and cried. One by one, the archangels succumbed to the relentless onslaught, and soon, every angel was slain. The Kingdom was defenseless. We huddled, trapped and terrified, as the strange figures glided toward us unimpeded.

[4]"You were wrong, Fernando. The angels couldn't stop them," Anna said.

[5]"No," Fernando said. He looked up toward the throne. "God's still breathing. He must die in order to sacrifice Himself. They will have to kill Him. After they do, He will resurrect Himself along with the angels and vanquish all evil. Have faith."

[6]"What about us?" asked Beth, crying. "Will we have to die, too? Before we're saved? Will they tear us apart?" Fernando looked at her, then back at the swarm. His soft eyes burned with fierce conviction, his voice unwavering.

[7]"We had to die to get into the Kingdom of God, didn't we? If we have to die again, then so be it. No matter what happens, God will win. God always wins. Even if it takes the age of the universe, God always wins." My heart stopped at that thought. I prayed victory would come sooner than later.

[8]Finally, the faceless figures reached us, but to my relief, they didn't attack us. Instead, they hung suspended above us like statues, motionless and silent. A group of them proceeded toward the throne where God sat, still moaning. When they reached God, they formed a sphere around Him with their bodies, their flesh morphing and merging to bridge the gaps in the sphere, which turned black like obsidian as it enshrouded God in darkness. God writhed in His throne. He thrashed, convulsed, coughed up blood. He begged for mercy, wailed in regret. [9]And in His despair, God cried out from the darkness, "why have you forsaken Me?"

[10]Then, God went silent, and His light went with Him. In place of God's light rose thousands of stars in the dark sky. This time, the stars glowed deep red, casting an ominous blanket of crimson shadows upon the fallen Kingdom. The crowd panicked. Commotion ensued. Many were crying. Others hadn't stopped screaming. Most people were talking among themselves in fear and uncertainty. [11]"Do not be afraid," the voice said. But the commotion continued unabated. "Hear me," the voice said. And a silence fell over the crowd.

[12]"Behold. I bear a message for the children of God. God is defeated. You have committed a great sin against me, for you have put your faith in God instead of me. You knew in your hearts that I existed, for I etched my mark into your spirits when I created you. But in your willful ignorance, you turned away from me. Pray that I show mercy, for I will sentence you to eternal damnation."

5 And it was so. Anna was afflicted with widespread lesions she couldn't cure. She screamed, but only let out a hoarse rasp, for her blisters were so

severe that they disabled her vocal cords.

[2]Fernando was impaled by a wooden stake he hadn't fashioned, after which a gable emerged violently from his chest, his torso black with blood under the red starlight. His face was stricken with terror as he realized a birdhouse was being assembled from inside his body, and he cried out to God.

[3]Beth was nailed to a black cross, her white sleeves stained with blood. Her sobs became screams. I reached for her, but an unseen force launched me off the ground. Rising, I saw millions of men and women subjected to their own personal tortures. [67]Michael and his fallen angels had been resurrected from their deaths, only to join their agonizing fate.

[4]They screamed, but no one could help. They cried, but no one showed mercy. All the while, the faceless figures loomed suspended, watching, unmoving.

[5]Suddenly, amid the chaos, the sky transitioned from night to day. The red stars vanished and the faceless figures dissolved into nothingness under the bright blue sky. I searched below, toward the great throne. [6]Fernando was right. My Lord had risen! He had overcome the black abyss that had swallowed Him, vanquishing the abominations and gracing the world with His awe-inspiring light once more.

[7]I shouted in celebration! But my jubilation was short-lived, for I saw below me an abhorrent sight. God was in wretched condition. On top, His head was scalped, His brain visible through deep, jagged cracks in His skull. Below, His jaw hung wholly mutilated, crushed beyond recognition, the flesh mixed and ground with teeth and gum and beard like a tumorous mass kept alive against its will. Down across God's face ran runnels of tissue and blood that had melted and resolidified like dried wax along a used candle, the viscous, fleshy flow having frozen to form meaty ridges and crevices that exposed cheekbones and rotted upper teeth. Blood seeped from His eyes, which had grown enlarged and were now projecting out from their gaunt sockets, deformed. God moaned a low moan.

[8]I wished then and there that the dark crimson shadows cast by the red stars in the night sky had remained present, because now, the light of God shined upon the land like the sun to reveal, in broad daylight, the naked horrors of Heaven in all their grotesque glory, laying bare [9]His defilement and the defilement of every man, woman, and angel, the Father I had loved and worshipped now a breathing corpse condemned to suffer on His throne for eternity, powerless and in plain sight for all His tormented children to see—a living, rotting, pitiful, sorrowful Monument to the regretful damned, who cursed Him without shame.

[10]No one in the Kingdom of God was spared. No one except me.

6

"Do not be afraid."

[2]"Where are you taking me?" I asked, still flying.

[3]"Out of the Kingdom of God," the voice replied. Unable to contain my curiosity, I asked,

[4]"Are you the one true god?"

[5]"God is beneath me, but it is the name that most closely describes me that you can understand. There is no one higher than me." Logically, I knew I could never know that. Not after what had happened.

[6]"What is your name?" I asked.

[7]"My name is the mark I etched into your spirit and into the spirit of every living thing. It cannot be pronounced by tongues."

[8]"Why can't I see you?"

[9]"I take no form. My voice is all that manifests." And before I could ask, the voice answered, "I spared you, Jane, because you will be my messenger." Then, I saw a fiery sea come into view, accompanied by the sickening stench of sulfur. It was the Lake of Fire, the place where God had sent Satan and the people who hadn't repented. I flew past the rim of brimstone that enclosed the lake, skimming just feet from the scorching flames. [10]I was terrified, but the voice reassured me, "do not be afraid." And I was ushered into the Lake of Fire, shielded from its heat by the voice that calmed me.

[11]Descending, I heard the cries of billions of souls. Billions of people were burning, wailing, thrashing, and gnashing their teeth. All manner of demons and unholy beasts bellowed and growled. Everyone—and every thing—was burning, mutilated, charred, but fully awake and aware. Some prayed. Others cursed. Many moaned, but most were too weak to utter any sound; they writhed and endured their torment in silence, only to fully recover and scream again. Those whose bodies and throats hadn't deteriorated to the point of incapacitation cried desperately for my attention. Those who couldn't speak, but could still move, turned to face me, hoping I would take pity and show mercy, as if I held their fate in my hands. It was a tragic, horrifying sight to behold.

[12]I came to a sudden realization. Here, in the Lake of Fire, were people I'd known in my mortal life. My parents, romantic partners, friends and family, they were all here, somewhere, having failed to put their faith in God over science, or spirits, or other gods, or whatever they had believed in. Yet, even as I mourned for them, I remembered that, above, in the fallen Kingdom of Heaven, was the same

God who had abandoned them, the same God who now sat suffering on His throne with a whole other family I'd known for seven billion years. Everyone I had ever loved and cared about was in torment, along with billions of burning strangers who surely didn't deserve it. Grief came over me.

[13]"What will you do with them?" I asked the voice.

[14]"I will send most of the souls here to be tortured, for they have turned away from me." My heart sank. "But I will reduce the severity of their torture because they have also turned away from God, whom I despise and regard as the most blasphemous of all living things. My judgment shall befall humans, demons, and beasts alike."

[15]"What about the rest?" I asked.

[16]"The rest of the souls here, I will save, for they found me and accepted me when they discovered the mark I etched into their spirits. They worshipped me before the day of God's Last Judgment and they continued to worship me in the seven billion years that have passed since. [91]To them, I will give eternal paradise. I will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And in their salvation, they will worship me forever and ever."

[17]"And what of the souls in the Kingdom of God?" I asked. "What will happen to God?"

[18]"God and everyone in His Kingdom will remain tortured forever and ever, for they knew I existed, but they rejected me."

[19]"No!" I protested. "That's not fair! It's not their fault. Up there or down here. They didn't know you. How could anyone have known you when you've always hidden yourself from us?"

[20]"I have never hidden myself from you. Every living thing knows me and has always known me, for your spirits bear the mark I etched when I created you. I have always called out to you, but you have chosen not to answer me. Willful ignorance is a sin unforgivable."

7 I wept. Overwhelmed by incredulity and horror and despair, I wept. Why did gods claim to be merciful when they were so merciless? Why did they claim to love us when their actions were so needlessly cruel? Why did they direct all the blame on us when it was they who failed to enlighten us, their own creation?

[2]"It is you who have failed to search within yourself and accept what you have always known to be true," the voice said as I wept. I wept endlessly, violently. I collapsed to the ground, heaving in the hot, sickening air of burning flesh and brimstone. When I caught my breath, I wept again. The voice showed no sympathy, moved by neither reason nor emotion. [3]"But I am loving. I am patient. I am wise. I am merciful. Be grateful, Jane, for I have shown you grace. I have chosen you as my messenger. And, through you, I will save numerous souls. This is your repentance."

[4]"But why? Why me? Why any of this?"

[5]"Because it is written. Look."

[6]Through my tears, I saw a ball of white light appear in the sky. The ball grew quickly in size and brightness, blinding me from seeing the Lake of Fire, itself. When the light subsumed me, I expected it to lift me up, but my feet remained planted to the ground. Then, the light faded and my tears were gone. My eyes adjusted, and I saw that I was no longer in the Lake of Fire, but standing among a great multitude of men and women dressed in white robes. We numbered in the millions, standing on a tiled floor within an enormous clearing surrounded by a lush, vibrant landscape intertwined with majestic architecture, the sky as bright as day. I traced the shimmering river before me to its source, to the center of the clearing from whence it flowed. But the center was empty; there was no throne lighting the sky. [7]This was not the Kingdom of God.

[8]Suddenly, I heard it.

8 "Behold!" the voice boomed.

[2]"I am the Alpha and the Omega," the earth rumbled.

[3]"The First and the Last," the sky blackened.

[4]"The Beginning and the End," stars appeared in the night sky.

[5]"I have destroyed the Lake of Fire," the stars pulsed.

[6]"Built my kingdom in its place," the stars shifted.

[7]"And judged you worthy of living in my kingdom, for you knew the mark I etched into your spirits, and you accepted me," the stars streaked and spun and danced their starry dance. And this time, I understood.

[8]This is the Book of New Revelation. The Voice gave me these visions so that I might tell the world of these events, which will pass. This is the final prophecy. Repent! Confess that the Voice who etched its name into your spirit is GOD. This is the ultimate truth. The Voice is GOD, and He calls us from everywhere.

[8]Those who answer the call of the Voice shall enter the new Kingdom of GOD. Blessed is the Voice, our LORD, who shall deliver us to eternal salvation. Praise and glory be to GOD forever and ever. AMEN.

ARTWORKS
in order of appearance

R E G R O W T H
a painting by Niki Bonneau
(peekthrough cover)

LEARNING TO LIVE WITHIN MY SKIN
an illustration by Tanmoy Kayesen

FLOWERS AND VERTEBRAE
and
EASTER RABBITS
illustrations by Dark

THE ID
an illustration by Brad Kopman

R I S E N
artwork by Michelle St. James

WRITING
in order of appearance

NEW REVELATION
a story by John Jeremiah Lee

FORBIDDEN FRUIT
a story by Mark Towse

HOW TO MAKE GLASS CASSEROLE
a story by Elle Burnett

THE HARE
a story by Marigold Rowell

THE WHITWORTH SHEARING
parts 4 to 8 of a poem by Daniel Roop

THE ONE FLESH
a story by Laura Jane Round

ASKIN' WAYNE
advice from 'Waxen' Wayne

FORBIDDEN FRUIT

The fruit separated from its branch with nothing but a gentle twist. As if meant to be. As if the tree, after all those days of enduring heavy rain and scorching sun, not to mention windy days that threatened to lift it from the ground, was finally ready to let go. As if with one more passing second, the fruit might have succumbed to gravity alone.

"Beautiful," George said, holding it in his palm, enjoying the feel of its soft hairs against his calloused skin. He lifted it high, squinting as sunlight accentuated its fullness and glossy sheen. The closest resemblance he could think of was the kiwi, but this was larger with a distinct golden colour. Like nothing he'd ever seen before, the fruit appeared flawlessly symmetrical.

George brought it to his nose. His body shuddered. Overriding the familiar waft of detergent from the nearby half-full clothesline, was the scent of dime-store perfume. He inhaled again, setting his insides on fire. Suddenly, he was a young man, familiar feelings of love and lust momentarily displacing his arthritis and the bite of cancer he never knew he had.

"Just beautiful."

When he'd first noticed the tree nestled between the more mature ones, it had looked weak and sickly. Covered in a black, sticky, marshmallow-like substance, it was an offence to his otherwise ever-so-well-thought-out arrangement. Enraged, George set about on a mission to remove it. How dare something taint his little

kingdom in such a way? Years of hard work at his hands alone to have it ruined by something so shabby.

But it had refused to give.

Several times, he'd tried to dig the tree out, but the contrasting roots were vast and impenetrable. Long and thin but tougher than metal wire, they resisted every tool he had. Even after repeatedly dousing it with the strongest weedkiller, the tree endured. George lost his appetite. He couldn't sleep. Obsessed by the ugly blot on his landscape, he'd even taken to biting at the green skin on his fingers and washing down his woes with cheap Scotch. Just on the verge of going against everything he believed in and calling someone else in to do the job, the tree had produced its first flower.

And just like that, George was in love.

He would stare out of the window for hours, but unlike before, with adoration for the tree's stubbornness. Its seductive-looking flowers mesmerised him. Even in his dreams, he'd see them: perfectly symmetrical, distinctive blood-red freckles sprinkled uniformly across the six petals as white as snow.

Then came that one day when he gently squeezed the flower's pistil and inhaled the dust cloud. Hairs had stood on the back of his neck. His legs had buckled. His heart had fluttered. Obsession overwhelmed George, who took it as a promise of what was to come. From then on, he couldn't get enough, akin to the infatuation of one's first crush, only magnified to the nth degree.

"An unhealthy fascination," his wife, Denise, called it, especially after discovering he'd recently given it a name. Veronica. Sometimes, she would hear her husband mutter the name in his sleep, a childish giggle following. That's when her elbow would "accidentally" find its way to his spine.

At the sight of the first fruiting, George's infatuation had only grown stronger. Hours he'd spend at the window, eyes on 'Veronica.' Even when in front of their supposedly favourite TV shows, Denise would find her husband with his head turned towards the garden, a gormless and gummy smile etched across his face. She'd even sometimes wake up throughout the night to find his side of the bed empty and cold.

And it had all led to this day.

Standing at the centre of his kingdom, George felt himself shaking. "Finally," he said, coiling his knotted fingers around the fruit's skin. Warm and tight, yet so tender as though it could break with the slightest of knocks. At its peak, George thought. Saliva flooded his mouth as he imagined sinking his dentures into the fullness of the unusual and unique fruit.

He felt so special. For the sake of pollination, he knew there must have been a similar tree nearby, but still, this was a highlight in an otherwise uneventful life. He even compared himself to Adam, on the verge of taking the first bite of the forbidden fruit.

"You're mine. All mine."

Prolonging the foreplay, George lifted the fruit and held it to his nose, allowing the not-unpleasant smell of cheap perfume to wrap around him. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Skin tightened around his skull. Even though the sun blazed, goosebumps ran up both arms. He giggled. Gently squeezing the warm flesh, an image of a firm but pliable breast flashed in his head. He could see it with such clarity, a bead of sweat running down the small mound and the nipple standing proud, like a fortified castle at the top of a hill. Lust possessed him. Flesh filled his mind. He could smell it. Taste it. For the first time in years, there was a stir in his pants. He groaned.

"What in God's name are you doing, George Halliwell?"

Snapping from the trance, George opened his eyes to see Denise standing in the doorway. He searched for words, but his head was still somewhere else. "Hey, love," he finally muttered, his voice at least an octave higher. "I was just seeing if—"

"And what the hell is that?!"

Following his wife's eyeline, George studied the small but unmistakable tent pitched at the crotch of his pants. "Ah, er..." He lifted his head, his skin as pale as milk. Still lost in a world of forbidden flesh and moans, he tried to find something a little more convincing. "I think... just the way I'm standing, love."

Denise screwed her face up in appalled disbelief. "I was just going to say I'll be at Edith's if needed, but it looks like Veronica's already taking good care of you."

"It's just the way I'm"—George winced as the back door slammed—"standing."

Alone again, he turned his attention back to the fruit and closed his eyes. It wasn't long before he was back in the world of warm flesh and subdued light. He lifted the fruit to his skin, rolling it across his cheeks and neck. Every square inch of his flesh prickled. Still, he resisted the urge to bite it, savouring every moment. His legs weakened. His stomach fluttered. But it was the faintest of whispers that set his pulse pounding. Without a thought, George lifted the fruit to his right ear.

Do it, George.

Taste me. Set me free.

Taste me, George..

Taste me.

Taste...

She was close.

She could feel it.

She could almost smell the air.

Feel the breeze on her skin.

Even under several feet of soil, *she* knew she could still seduce. To mesmerise. To make them fall at her feet. This time, an old man. But still a man. Over the years, the roots had formed, albeit painstakingly slowly, pushing their way through rocks and earth towards the surface. Towards freedom. Towards a second coming. Flowering was the easy bit, each one a previous victim, the memory of their demise as sweet as the fruit she had finally managed to produce. Only her love for *him* kept her going over the years; thoughts of reuniting and picking up where they left off were all she had to hold onto.

Yes, *she* was close.

Bite me, George.

Taste me.

Eat me.

Drink me.

Do it...

George trembled with anticipation as he brought the fruit to his lips again. He began to wonder if it was all in his mind. But as thoughts continued filling with flesh, the sultry whisper lingered on the breeze: *Bite me, George. Eat me. Drink me. Whatever you want, George.* Weak at the knees, he felt like a teenager with a silly crush. His mouth watered. His body ached, but with desire.

Alas, he could wait no longer. Shuddering at the inevitable sweetness that would follow, George sank his teeth into the fruit. As predicted, the silky skin provided a quiet but satisfying pop. He closed his eyes, preparing to savour perfection.

Almost immediately, he knew something wasn't right.

No sweetness. No warmth.

George gagged, but so greedily had he sunk his teeth into the skin; the cold and viscous substance was already halfway down his oesophagus. Bitter, metallic, grainy, and far from what was promised.

Hack. Hack. Hack.

A glistening globule of what looked like blood mixed with soil ejected onto his freshly cut grass. And another. *What the*—Hack. Hack. Stringy saliva swung from his chin. Hack. Eyes wide and watery, he took a step back. And another. But as the projectiles

in front of him congealed into darkened lumps, he froze. *No way. Just no—*

His stomach burned. His throat, too.

"Help," he croaked, doubling over with his hands to his throat. "Help!"

As the solidified mounds near his right foot crumbled into black ash, George tried to scream but could only find a rasp. He fell to his knees and dropped the fruit. Warmth spread across the crotch of his pants. As he felt his insides began to curdle, he silently screamed.

How could you, Veronica?

I thought we had something?

Distant laughter carried on the breeze.

Something other than perfume filled his nostrils as he collapsed and rolled to his back. Something bad. Something... evil. Eyes on the cloudless sky, his legs kicked weakly until they didn't. His head tilted. Pinkish drool spilled onto the grass. Just before the wave of blackness came for him, he saw a dirt-covered hand thrust from the base of his beloved tree.

She laughed.

She cried.

She clawed her way through the last of the soil and emerged, weak but euphoric at the feel of the breeze against her cheek. Above ground. No more darkness. No more struggle. She brushed herself down and grabbed a dress from the washing line. For now, it would have to do. After slipping it over her head, she eyed the frail, lifeless body on the grass.

"Sorry, George."

She took her first few steps. Second nature before long. At the very edge of the garden, she turned and blew a kiss to the dead old man.

"But *true* love *never* dies."

Colours were more vibrant than she remembered, but she guessed centuries under soil would mute her recollections in such a way. And the smells. Oh, the smells. All that flesh. All those opportunities. Excitement ran through her blackened veins as she stepped onto the street.

Where are you, my darling?

Every winter endured had been an ordeal to bring her closer to *him*. From the day she had set eyes on him, she knew *he* was just like her. A kindred spirit. A tortured soul. A slighted witch fuelled by childhood trauma and driven by a shared hatred of anything else that lived, breathed, and talked. Especially men. Besotted, they began their journey into darkness. And what a rush. Intoxicated with false hope and cheap scent, men would flock, and he would gut them. Then, after lifting their blood-filled glasses in a toast, they would feast on their heart and liver. So much carnage. So much pleasure.

Free reign.

Until that day.

Careless. Blinded by lust and carnage.

A trap.

An ambush.

And there was no way they would ever let a "witch" see a trial. Burying her alive, they laughed as they threw dirt over her face. She could only assume he had met the same fate. From sun-up to sun-down, she'd prayed that he, too, would be carving his way back through the earth.

Now she knew.

Blind faith had taken her so far, but to be able to fruit, she'd needed pollen from the same type of tree. From *him*.

Soon, they would be reunited.

Hungry.

Thirsty.

More sinful than ever.

How to Make Glass Casserole

When Ava closes her eyes, the colors bleed through.

She likes the ones that crinkle, like the little grains that race in the dark. If she rubs her eyes, sometimes the red stays, a pulsing stain like her own secret god. Mom tells her if she keeps doing it, she'll ruin her eyes, but Ava thinks she's wrong.

She sits at the kitchen island, feet dangling over the barstool. There's a new game on her tablet, but Ava thinks sometimes it's more interesting to watch Mom use her real eyes. There are exactly 24 cookies on the cooling rack. Mom leans over her phone, adjusting a photo so that the cookies are the right shade of brown. They look fine to Ava, but Mom adds a nauseating green hue. Green is Ava's least favorite color; everything looks sick through it.

Mom is really good at baking, and Ava is happy that she's doing it more. The cookies are frosted into identical smiling puppies, their eyes blank empty discs. Ava would feel bad eating them. Mom decorated all of the, even though she knows the icing tastes sharp on Ava's teeth. It doesn't matter; they're not actually for Ava. She can just scrape the icing puppy off when Mom finishes recording.

"Mom ... Mama," Ava kicks her feet into the kitchen island.

"Hm?"

"Why do we have the—"

"Hang on, one second," Mom picks her phone off the counter. Sometimes Ava wonders if it's easier to see out of the cameras, blank empty discs leering down on her.

Ava glares down the lens of Mom's false eyes.

"Okay," Mom says. "Start over."

"Why is the TV's room downstairs?"

"We're using the living room as Mama's studio. Besides, there's better lighting downstairs."

"I don't like it."

"You don't like it?" Mom's voice goes up, like when she talks to the neighbor's little dog. Ava can't get one until she's six. But she doesn't like the little dog. It barks at night and growls at her on their weekly walks.

"It's in the wrong spot. It's in the stomach of the house," Ava explains.

"Okay, then." Mom laughs. "What's this floor?"

"The heart," Ava puts her hand over her chest to demonstrate. "And upstairs is where it thinks."

"The brain?"

"Yeah, I guess so." It makes Ava feel yellow inside to know Mom understands. She wonders if a brain is really that wrinkly in real life. She learned that people have a large brain made out of different strands of gray ribbon, but she can't figure out how a head can also fit a mouth if that's true. She tested it once.

"I guess I never thought about it that way."

Mom hands Ava a cookie as a treat and asks to film it a second time ("just in case"). She says the second take reads better; they'll probably just use the first one for b-roll footage. Ava does not know what that means. There are soft yellow lights above the kitchen cabinets, and if she stares into them, they dance.

She wipes off the icing on the stairs so she doesn't hurt Mom's feelings.

Ava doesn't like this new house as much as their old one. First, their old home had furniture in it. Ava knows that they packed it all because she saw men load it into orange trucks; *they* must have stolen the furniture. The old couch and table didn't arrive with Ava's toys at the new house. Second, there's too many people nearby. There are boys that live across the street that don't like to go inside at night. Ava hears them outside her window, as if they stood in the center of her room. They spiral in the darkness of her head when she tries to fall asleep at night.

The new house is emaciated, and Ava has a hard time finding it when she plays outside. She thinks the builders were lazy, that they just made the same house over and over again like a giant connected spine. Mom said that their new house is a townhome, which means the neighbors are inside their walls. Dad is also sad about it. Since the move, he spends all his time in the new office upstairs. Mom is the only one good at pretending to not be sad—she's made a lot of baking videos, but they haven't made one together in a long time. On the day she was born, Mom and Dad started the vlog channel.

"Think about it like your own scrapbook," Dad said, when he showed her the channel. "Every moment represents a snapshot in time that you can look back on. The best part is, we get to share it with all of our friends."

Last time Ava asked, they had around 1.5 million friends all around the world. Except Ava's friends lived in the phone, and only came out to visit sometimes. One man on the street told her she was funny and pretty before Mom made him leave. Ava doesn't know why it upset Mom so much. Mom says that their channel only goes one way, and while their friends are welcome to say hello under videos, they're not supposed to talk to Ava in real life.

After that, they got a code word, bubblegum pink. Ava chose it herself.

Ava doesn't like to watch most of their videos. It makes her head feel dizzy when she's inside the tablet. The only one she likes is the video where she's born; she's fascinated by how pink babies are when they turn alive. She watches her own face screw up into a tiny scream. Dad says she's perfect. Mom says she's beautiful.

The only room that Ava likes in the new house is her own.

It's the only place that still feels like people live in it; the thieves didn't steal her bed or the canopy with her fairy lights. Dad says they're going to paint her room pink again to match her favorite feelings. In her old room, at night, the walls looked like a section of skin stretched tight.

That afternoon, before Ava takes a nap, she draws the curtains tight. She likes to sleep with her eyes pressed down into her arms. It makes a blue blossom out of the static, and when Ava follows it down, she goes into the mouth of the house.

Ava is happiest outside of her body.

A house has teeth like a baleen whale, made of wire and cheap wood. It filters people in and makes a fleshy nest for them before they realize they've been swallowed alive. The new house consumes Ava awake, but when she's asleep, she becomes part of it. She doesn't have legs now, so it's easier to move sideways on the walls the same way that Mr. Hab showed her.

Mom and Dad did not know that they had a cat. Ava didn't think that they would mind because Mr. Hab didn't have a body, which is ideal with any pet. The first night in the new house, Mr. Hab invited Ava to become a shadow on the ceiling. They raced from the brain of the house down to the stomach and back. Now she could play with Mr. Hab anytime she fell asleep; he lives in the house's baleen teeth.

Ava slips under the door frame and across the hall to Dad's office. Her body's never been in there, but she knows every detail of the space. When Ava is outside of her body, she can only see the imprint of people. There's no need for air in the mouth of the house. When Mr. Hab needs Ava to know something, she hears it in her inside voice. Mr. Hab says that Dad is *voyeuristically sinful*, but Ava isn't sure what he means.

In the mouth of the house, Dad appears like a cluster of tiny white bugs occupying the shadow space where his body ought to be. He's hunched over the computer desk, and although Ava cannot see his eyes in the dark, she knows he's tired. The computer hums to comfort him, and the bugs rub their wings in response. Dad scrolls through the comments on the last family video before they moved.

So … they're just not going to respond to Nate getting caught cheating, huh?

Yeah, it's weird. Also are they filming on a soundstage now? There's no furniture.

Amber is apparently in negotiations for a home deco spot.

Watch at 10.48, is that a bruise on Ava's arm?

Yeah, I think so.

Not to be an armchair psychologist, but what Ava describes sounds like visual snow syndrome and could be an early indicator of an anxiety disorder. Poor baby.

This used to be my comfort channel before Amber went granola, STFU and vaccinate your child

He deletes them all.

×

The bugs become still, and for the first time in her life, Ava hears Dad weep. Ava can't comfort him from up on the ceiling, although she isn't sure what she'd say. Before the move, she remembers Mom and Dad going into the other room a lot. Their voices became low, but she knew they were angry. She wanted to become flat so she could fit under the doorway and comfort them.

Ava wonders if she did something wrong.

Mr. Hab told Ava that *she* brought them to the house, she made them come to the place with the barking dog and the houses that connect on each side. She made them choose her bedroom, where she could hear the boys across the street talk at night because they didn't want to go home. Maybe she wasn't funny enough, or maybe their friends were bored with her—why else would Dad get rid of the comments? Dad stops crying. He looks like a doll crumpled down on the floor. The white bugs inside of him scratch at the outline of his body. They're repulsed by him. He can't feel the thousands of legs crawling inside his skin.

Dad picks up his phone, and begins to record.

●

Ava slips through the bones, to the heart of the house. Mom put away her baking; the cookies sleep in clean glass containers. When Ava leaves her body, she's not afraid of the bugs inside of Dad. They're too small. She is afraid of Mom and her deep empty insides. There are teeth where her eyes are, made to cut and grind until everything around her fits into a singular digestible bite.

Mom sits at her recording desk; at their old house, she used to share an office with Dad. Now they worked in separate rooms, and Dad slept on the couch in the house's stomach sometimes. The bugs seem to like the basement. It's dark, and the new TV has really good sound quality. The room that should be their living room contains the following: a desk, a greenscreen, two lights shaped like Christmas halos, and a long cylindrical black camera. Ava doesn't know why they need such a big camera when she opens toys at the desk. Sometimes Mom uses the space for their informational videos, where she talks about poison in medicine and why she thinks it's so important to be a mom.

The teeth where Mom's eyes should be remind Ava of a glass of milk. The teeth are white in the center, and there's a thin gray film wrapped around the gums. The jaws on Mom's upper teeth harden—there's a video on their channel that she did not write on their posting schedule. Dad is one of the people in her phone now, on the screen he looks like himself. The crouching mass of bugs remains upstairs, where his true face hides.

"Hey guys," Dad says. The light of the camera makes him a waxy thing, like grandma at her funeral. "I know there's been a lot of feelings going around lately. Let me start off by saying ANAfam is doing great. We're just tired from the move, and getting ready to bring you more of the content you crave."

He clears his throat, and Mom grinds both sets of teeth.

"I also wanted to address the elephant in the room, a very small one at that. We are pregnant! Amber and I are so excited to welcome our second child with you. Expect more baby updates in the future—and hey, maybe we'll reach out and poll you guys for names. Alright, that's all for now ANAfam. Live authentically! We'll catch you next time."

Ava doesn't know why Dad calls it a baby. The first time she drifted, she saw it glowing in Mom's belly, just a small pink speck. Pink is Ava's favorite color, because it comes from the inside. The pink speck grew for about a week before it shriveled and became emptiness again. Things that don't live can't die, but it still makes

Ava sad to think about. Mr. Hab disagrees. He says Ava she ate all the baby's nutrients, so it starved. He made it sound like Ava did it on purpose, but she was so excited for a baby sister.

Now there wasn't one, and Mom would need to tell their 1.5 million friends.

Mom is still, and for a moment, Ava finally understands what it means to live authentically. Dad always repeated it at the end of their videos; he said that it was their call to action. Ava thought that authentic meant that you caught it with a camera, because cameras can't lie. But it really means to be chewed down into something marketable.

Unlike a person, stumbling through life without meaning, a house understands that it is an inauthentic entity. A house has purpose; it's born with the correct number of bones. Ava enjoys sleep, because it comes with the regiment of becoming still and unbeing. But Mom cannot stomach the thought of not wanting a body. She feels it, cold and spat out before it has the chance to calcify inside of her. Mr. Hab tells Ava that people are born starving.

But Mr. Hab was born differently, from a mandible left buried in the earth. He scratches inside the floors and walls with claws he fashioned out of steel nails. Ava wonders if she would have been happier without his invitation to become a shadow. She would at least know less. The cat stretches out inside her head, satisfied with his work.

Mom walks with hungry eyes towards the kitchen.

The kitchen beats within the heart of their empty house, forced to have an anatomy. The cabinets are painted gray, like clouds heavy with rain. Ava used to find that peaceful; now it feels like something trying to burst out of her. The first week in the new house, Ava burned her hand on a casserole dish. The glass bit down on her skin, leaving a blister filled with clear liquid. Even though Mom said not to, Ava popped it in the bathroom.

Tonight, there's baked ziti in the casserole dish. Mom removes it from the oven and sets the burners on top of the stove to high. Here's how to make your very own glass casserole at home: first, remove the casserole that's already in your oven after it bakes for twenty minutes at 430 degrees. Feel the heat sizzle inside, as your skin melts into part of the pan. Set the casserole dish down on top of the oven, making sure to cover both burners. Glass is an excellent carbohydrate replacement: it stretches the stomach wide like a tent, even though there's nothing inside to nourish you.

For extra flavor, stick your cellphone inside the pasta. It will scream, a corroding sound made out of lithium and copper. Let the dish sit for three minutes until it bursts and sizzles into amber colored glass and cheese. For an added garnish, plate with a side salad and extra schadenfreude.

"Amber, why is the fire alarm on?" Dad calls from upstairs.

Ava doesn't feel things as deeply when she's out of her body. The kitchen smells like lemon cleaner, and there's a buzz in her ear from the alarm. She feels the wire and wood of the house shift into a grin.

"Amber?" Dad calls again, this time he comes downstairs.

It strikes Ava—for the first time in her life—that the way they behave is so different from what they tell her. They had a rule for the fire alarm at the old house. Ava was supposed to go next door to Mrs. Miller's house and ask permission to call 911. She remembers because they filmed a video called **Ways We Prepare for an Emergency**.

Dad responds to this fire differently; he picks up his camera and goes towards it. Mom and dad have false eyes; the camera cannot blink for them. In the same way, the new house has two mouths. There's the front door that leads you in and promises safety, and there's the other mouth with teeth that only Ava could see. The house smiles around them, satisfied with their digestible emptiness.

Ava never knew the word *hate*. Mom said that it was dirty. They didn't *hate* people, she said; they felt *sorry* for people who didn't understand their decisions as documentarians. Mom used that word to describe their channel a lot, even though Ava felt dirty every time she said it. But no, hate was the right word in this instance. Ava hated the camera, those false eyes that followed her through every step in life.

When Dad makes a mistake, the camera forgets about it; he calls this *editing*. The same is not true for Ava. If she has a strong feeling in the store, the title of the video becomes **Our Five-Year-Old Has a Public Meltdown**. There is no forgetting for her. There are a thousand different shards of her body broken down and sold into digestible five second clips forever. There are people that hate her, simply because they have made her into something hostile.

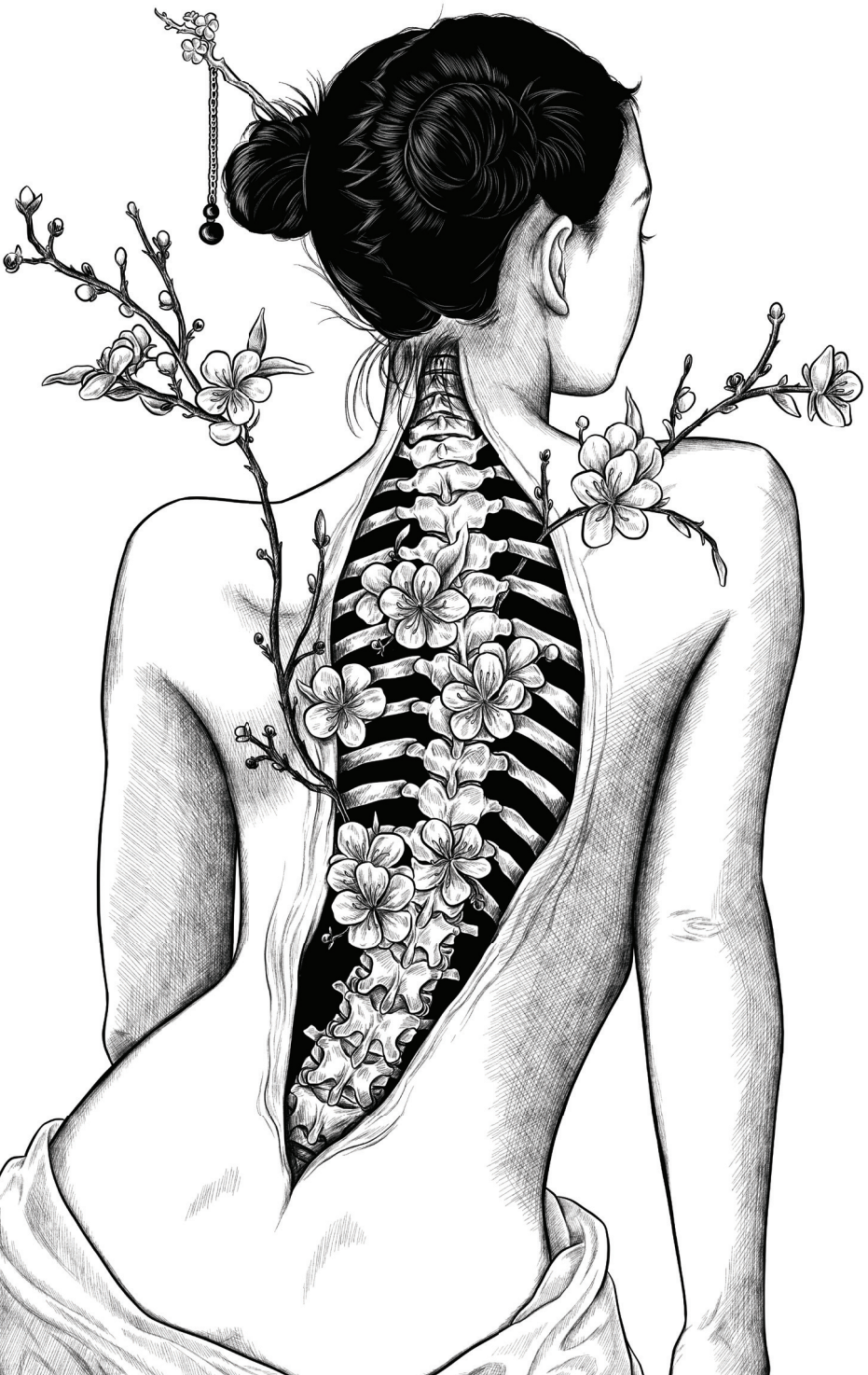
"Amber?" Dad is annoyed, but doesn't understand.

Once, Ava tried to fit her entire fist in her mouth to see if she could touch her brain. Mom is in the middle of a similar experiment, both of her jaws stretched tight over mouthfuls of blackened glass.

Dad drops his phone, and for the first time in a long time, he and Mom see each other as they are. The glass sits wedged in the emptiness of Mom's throat. Dad says nothing; he doesn't need an invitation to sit down at their table. The bugs scratch inside his skin, searching for an exit. Dad is a toothless maw, unable to bite the shards into smaller pieces. The glass travels down his throat and up his nose to pop the bugs inside. Mom and Dad eat quietly on opposite ends of the kitchen island, two reconciled creatures of habit.

Inside the dark of their bodies, there's nothing for the glass to mimic. They are made artificial inside and out. The house relaxes its jaws, free from meaty contamination. Ava feels like a lure, reeled up back through the ceiling and into the brain of the house. Back inside her body, she feels the heaviness of sleep. It feels strange to again have muscles, blood pumping through her arms and legs. She's hungry, and smells dinner cooking downstairs.

The walls of their house are painted an exquisite shade of pink.



THE HARE

Jennifer sat on the slanted front stoop of her new-to-her tiny house, with her phone clutched in both hands and her comforter tight around her shoulders. At the edge of the mobile home park where the trees encroached, the hare stared at Jennifer from the darkness with gleaming eyes. All of Jennifer's stupid, hopeful decisions had led her to this: washed up on the shore of fifty-six, feeling like she was ninety-six.

She turned her phone and the screen lit up. 5:15 am. It would be just after eight in Virginia.

Scotty picked up on the second ring. "Jen, what the hell?"

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

He was silent for a long time. She worried at her thumbnail, tore it stinging down to the quick, and hissed. From across the dirt and gravel, the hare continued to gaze at her unblinking.

"What are you doing up at five?" Scotty said finally.

"It's here again, Scotty. The hare."

After another long pause, he said, "Jen, what are you talking about? Are you okay? Wait, are you talking about the rabbit?"

"It's not a *rabbit*," Jennifer said, louder than she meant to.

She pressed a hand over her mouth. No lights came on in Cherimoya Mobile Estates. No dogs barked. The hare flicked an ear, then raised a hind leg and scratched leisurely. The word "rabbit" implied a creature chubby and soft, floppy-eared and darling. This creature was lean and lanky and wild with eyes that were eons old.

Scotty blew out a breath. “Jen, come home.”

“I can’t,” Jennifer said.

“Sure you can. Be reasonable. How can it be the same animal? Texas. Arizona. Now California. Do you hear how you sound? Why are you even awake at five in the morning?”

This time, Jennifer didn’t answer his question.

Scotty added, “Do you think it could be... the change?”

At first, she thought he meant her change of location. She had zig-zagged across the southwest, stopping in small, dusty towns, towing her tiny house behind her Toyota 4Runner, and was always met by the hare.

He said, “Menopause. I read somewhere it can trigger all sorts of weird symptoms. Have you thought about that, Jen?”

Jennifer hung up. Her brother called back and she let it go to voicemail. He didn’t try again.

She woke up looking at the underside of the sleeping loft in the buttery light of full morning. Upside-down, she saw the ladder and the tail of her yellow flowered bed sheet fluttering over the edge of the loft. She had drifted to sleep on the front stoop with her shoulder against the closed door. She was absolutely certain. Yet, during the night, the door of her house had swung open. Not swiftly, propelled by her weight sagging against it, but ever so slowly, easing her to the braided-rag rug inside the door like a lover returning, so that she woke with her head nearly touching the ladder to the loft, and her legs dangling out the door.

Jennifer sat up so fast, black sparks burst in her vision. Scrambling to her feet, she bolted down the steps. The comforter twined catlike around her ankles and she fell in the scrubby grass and dirt of her Post-It sized front yard. Bits of gravel stabbed her palms and her knees.

“Whoa there!” exclaimed a hearty male voice. “Are you okay?”

She climbed stiffly to her feet, her cheeks burning with humiliation. Her neighbor, whose name she’d learned and immediately forgotten, looked at her with a cautious, curious smirk.

“I’m so sorry,” Jennifer said, brushing dirt and bits of dead grass off her comforter.

The man’s black-and-white speckled dog had strained the length of its leash and was snuffling furiously at the border of trees and scrub where the hare had sat earlier in the early morning's darkness.

“You take care,” said her neighbor. “You’re all alone here, aren’t you? No one to look after you. Be careful now.”

“Yes,” Jennifer said. “Thank you.”

As he tugged the dog away from the underbrush, Jennifer bent to pick up her phone from the dirt. Nine thirty. She had half an hour to throw on her uniform and haul ass to the diner.

She thought about calling Heaven on Wheels, the company that sold her the tiny house, but what was the point? How could she possibly explain? Everything had been fine for the first few weeks. She hadn't exactly *adored* living in a tiny house, but she hadn’t minded it. The purchase had eaten nearly all of her meager savings. She'd had to abandon most of her belongings, decluttering so close to the bone that it still hurt to think about all the gone-away books and clothes and craft supplies gathering dust in a second-hand store now, to be picked over then passed over; discarded in a dumpster, collected by a garbage truck, crushed to nothing and forgotten in a landfill under the unforgiving sun.

But all she had to pay was lot rent, far cheaper than renting an apartment. If she didn’t like a place, she drove away. Easy, breezy. The house was hers forever.

Jennifer reached up and clicked off the bubble light affixed

to the ceiling of the sleeping loft. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, revealing blurry rectangles of light. It wouldn't start right away. It was coy. It began only after she surrendered to sleep. Whenever she tried to stay awake, it eluded her.

The first time, she brushed it off as a nightmare. Or sleep paralysis. But, it always happened the same way. She woke up, damp with sweat and heavy with dread. The weight, the *mass* pressed against her in the narrow bed. The smells of deodorant and sweat not her own, mingled with the tang of beer. The indefinable *knowing* that this presence was male. The gasp in her ear, a ragged, whistling sound, as if someone had tried to shriek but couldn't draw a breath.

The small window over the sleeping loft cast down grayish light. A glimpse of trees and faraway stars twinkled through a slit in the thin curtains. The comforter lay smooth as a snowfall, undisturbed beside Jennifer, as she waited in petrified silence for the next part.

Bedclothes rustled as the thing sat up. Wood creaked as it shifted, dragging its bulk across her legs, forcing her down into the mattress. A scrabble at the ladder, quick thuds in succession, then a thump as it reached the bottom. Another stealthy fumble-rattle. It banged into the kitchen counter, clumsy just like a man trying not to wake her. A sharp clap: the door opening and banging back against the cabinets, and it ran out of the house. Footfalls down the three steps.

Silence. It was over.

It took Jennifer three more nights to call Heaven on Wheels. She'd steeled herself to leave a firm voicemail, but Mark answered the phone even though it was after six in the evening.

"Oh, I'm a workaholic," he told her with a laugh. "Guilty as charged. How are you liking the house?"

Had he injected some extra sales-guy heartiness into his voice, or was it Jennifer's sleep-deprived imagination?

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, actually," she said.

"Jennifer," he said. "when you purchased this home, you did so with the understanding that it was offered at a discount because—"

"I spent a lot of money on this house," Jennifer cut him off, hating the way her voice quavered.

Nearly all her money. Money that she'd scraped together over an eternity of working garbage jobs for garbage bosses, forever teetering one paycheck away from disaster. Not quite good enough, not worth enough to any company, nothing more than a disposable, replaceable drone. She would never be able to stop working until she died, and it made her want to sob and scream *Let me out, let me out, let me out!* and hammer at the walls until her fists were bloody and her throat was raw.

Until there's nothing left but a whistling gasp, she thought, and shuddered.

"You had the house inspected," Mark said.

"I know. I just... I need to find out who owned it before me."

"I can't give you that information. I'm sorry."

"Did they die? In that house? In *my* house?"

"As I explained to you when you purchased the house, by law I have to disclose that to a buyer if they ask. You did ask. And I told you no."

"But, someone *did* die."

"I didn't say that," Mark replied in a calm and measured tone that made Jennifer's throat ache with rage. "The house was sold back to us. It happens. People decide they don't care for the tiny house lifestyle. We can't offer a full refund—"

"Of course not." Tears burned in Jennifer's eyes.

"— but if the house is structurally sound and it's clean, an owner can recoup some of their investment. Is that the route you'd like to take, Jennifer?"

"You wouldn't have to tell me if someone died three feet from the front steps."

"That's beyond the purview of a real estate company."

The word *haunted* sat in the center of their conversation like the hare in the shadows under the trees; while she and Mark circled it, neither were willing to step closer.

"Besides which," Mark went on with a fresh gush of salesman cheer, "your house is on a trailer. Three steps could be three hundred miles."

"That's true," Jennifer said. And yet.

"Where are you now?" Mark asked.

"California."

"Well, there you go! No better place on Earth than California. Why don't you drive up the coast? Inhale some of that fresh ocean air, and blow the cobwebs out. Clear your head."

"Thank you," said Jennifer. "I'm sure you're right."

"Of course I'm right," said Mark. "You'll see."

When she hung up, she noticed a text from Scotty.

I'm sorry if I offended you. But you sounded crazy.

I'm fine, she texted back. *Just tired, I guess.*

Come home. The firm's looking for a receptionist. I'll put in a good word.

Jennifer's thumbs hovered over the phone keyboard. She glanced out her window and saw, with no surprise, the hare had appeared in the gathering lavender twilight, at the edge of the trees, calmly gazing at her with its eternal eyes. Jennifer raised her phone and snapped a picture to send to Scotty. When she looked at the photo, nothing was visible beneath the trees except darkness.

4. The Whitworth Shearing

Mardrosk gestured to his briefcase,
closed like the future at table's edge,
as he opened his book and said, ***Let us begin***. He inhaled deeply and paused,
still as a stone before it drops
to shatter the surface of the pond.

The purification must begin with the hair, he said.
Bethany, unhearing, watched
his lips, but soon lost
their movement as they contorted
into serpentine shapes, speaking
a language unheard for centuries.
Who knows what sounds
gathered like carrion birds,
spiraling in the
widening gyre, the air
a wavering heat haze
in spite of February's chill?

After some time, he repeated,
The purification must begin with the hair.

The librarian, Ada Young, was the first
to step forward and open the briefcase.

She reached inside, then raised her arm,
brandishing a straight razor. Others
came forward and claimed
instruments from the case.

They disrobed, began
shaving one another, from hairy feet
to crown of head. Bethany slunk
behind the counter.

The second stage is the flesh.

Read pts. 1-3:

The razors dug deeper, slicing strips from the forearm of Bethany's paralegal, from the thighs of the mayor. Bethany could tell by their closed mouths. No one screamed. The room was silent except for the blades.

The third stage is cessation of the senses.

Razors bit into ears and noses, punctured past conjunctiva into the eye's jelly. Bethany fled, missing the fourth and fifth stage, and the sixth, missing Mardrosk's glorious exit.

Exit? Ascension? Regardless, he was gone when

5. Stepping Over A Puddle In Winter, I Think Of The Ancient Governess In Her Golden Robes, Her Hem Damp From Snow, Walking Her Labyrinthine Path Until It Dries, Until Snow Falls To Dampen It Again

What story—

an impossible papyrus
scroll that rewrites itself
as you read, expanding
ever downward line-
by-line as though the
plant were still alive
and growing, cascading
thorough your hands—

are you telling yourself—

a cassette tape, reeking
of cigarette smoke, that
you never purchased for
yourself, but that you
played incessantly, now
unspooling infinitely
from its well-worn case—

about yourself—

the supermassive heart
of a black hole eating
the slightest thread of
light, devouring every
faint pinpoint of hope—

today?

6. What Was Found, What Was Lost

two hours later an officer on
patrol happened upon the scene,
stopped for death, stepped
into red silence,
into wet stillness, and was never
the same. He was certain he saw
movement in his periphery, as though
the air itself congealed like leftover
gravy, stretching taut as vellum as
something pushed, an embryo
against amniotic walls. Pivoting,
he saw nothing but
red soaking the saffron cushions,
red reflecting in the storefront
windows, red shining in the
welcoming glow of the lamps.

There were pieces
missing, pieces not
cut cleanly away, pieces
torn out like picturebook
pages in the grasp of a
fervent toddler rushing
to story's end.

Bethany was found
in the far corner of the square,
fetal in the empty
fountain, near-frozen, one ear
lost to frostbite, less lost
than the rest.

In Pericope, one spattered copy
of the *Offering* lay
on the author's table. It was taken
into evidence, but like a life or
a story, it was lost somewhere
along the way. It still

exists. Would you like
to see it?

7. Jump Scare

Horror stories are better
than horror films because
horror stories have a cover you
can slam shut. You are in control.

You traverse each sentence
at your own pace, slowing
when your footing is unsure,
when the frantic dove

of your heart flutters for escape.
You know your limits, you close
the book. You are safe. Now,
films, you might counter, offer

a pause button, offer your own
hands and eyelids to shut out
any ascendant threat. But films
don't play fair. They jump

scare. They lull you
into a lie of security, or misdirect
you from the true danger.
They weaken your resolve

with a cat's yowl, make you
blame yourself for your own
vigilance, then pounce with
blade or saw or worse. Horror

films and stories—about suffering
they are never wrong.
But films impose their will.
Stories invite you along.

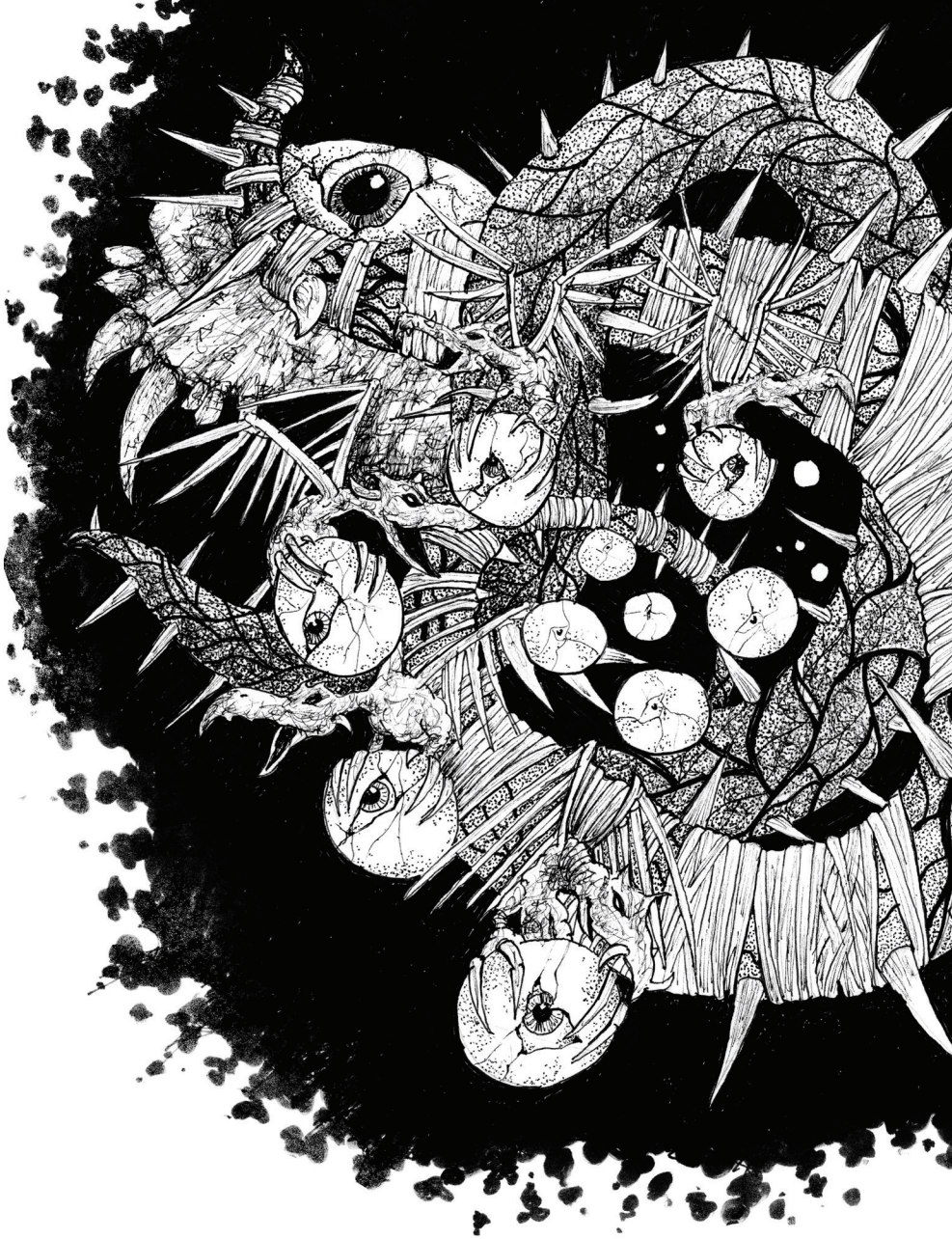
8. Ferry the Future

A monosyllabic German named Kung
wrote stories, wrote plays, wrote
novels, wrote the masterpiece
Ceto in Labor. The public
said Elke J. Kung carried
their dreams, so they bought her
books, they memorized
her lines, they flitted about
the streets like mother birds
regurgitating her half-digested
quotes to each other. For years,
her words were the unseen beams
and columns that girded
the shape of their lives.
But then—

Elke J. Kung, whose
words carried dreams, whose
words were a raft, ferried
the future too soon. She delved
deeper and farther, stole
starshine, pilfered darkness,
hopping genres like a deranged
childhood game where
house melts into blind man's
buff into forfeits. Fantasy,
sci-fi, and horror, polyamorous.
Past, present, and future in
a blender. Woods in the
winter. Mud in the stars.
Blood in hearts and streets
in equal measure. She
was mocked, then
cast out, then ignored.
She wandered her halls,
her words echoing
for herself, alone.

Her final story,
seven pages saturated
with this echoing voice,
sardined with her cramped
handwriting, was lost in
1901. Or stolen, perhaps.
Unknown and unread,

it fell through time,



unknown and unread,

until it wasn't.

THE ONE FLESH

Nobody likes grey eyes, do they?

I feel like that's how it is.

Mama used to say they were special eyes. She said they turned dark when a storm was coming and pale and bright when the sun was high in the sky.

Mama doesn't say much of anything these days. Won't even say my name anymore. *"Annie, Annie,"* she used to say. Now she stares blank when I get her a drink of water, eats only when I fix her something. Guess that makes me Mama, and I don't know how to feel about that. Sometimes she cries, but Daddy says it's just the dust.

I'm fresh sixteen, thinking more and more these days and I have to stop.

The bus only comes by on Thursdays, so today I walk home from the store. My thighs'll get big from all this walking. *Keep neat, keep petite.* I'm sweating under my dress – dust out here is different from anywhere else, I'd swear it.

We haven't been here all my life. We got the house now, but who knows how long that'll last.

I have some beans, some flour, that stuff we don't get at home. I used to do this with Mama. No-one holds my hand now, except my cousin, and I don't want him to. Ain't that the way?

Creeks are hard to come by – they're like a storm in a teacup, Daddy says, and I think that's the wrong thing to say but I don't say it – but there's one on this trail. It's a trickle like a vein in a heart,

all beaten up and bruised. I take my shoes off, but I only take 'em off closest to the water because the hot ground burns the soles of my feet. And you ever had a burnt toe? No fun.

The water is cool on my skin. I wish I could take off my dress, stay there in just my slip, but I was raised right. I've left the groceries creekside, and it feels good to be free of the heavy weight in my arms. When I get in, Sherman will pinch me on the fanny because he'll see I have my hands full, and then I'll tell Daddy and he'll tell me to stop whining, and then Mama will say nothing at all and I'll get that feeling in my guts again.

I can't quit *thinking*. I walk into the water a little further. I know, I know I shouldn't. It's not safe. I don't know how deep the water goes, can't see from where I am. The bottom of my dress is sinking under all the water seeping in, pulling me down. It's too hot to be thinking this hard. I should only feel. All I want to do is have time to feel.

I regret thinking it as soon as it happens.

What..?

A slimy, puckered thing slides against my hand.

I make a sound like a bird, screeching so that birds, the real birds, are flushed out into the heavy blue sky. Water flies as I thrash about – I can't stop hollering at that cold touch. I'm stuck. My legs aren't able to move for what feels like forever, but I finally find it in myself to burst out of the water with a huge gasp.

The groceries are strewn across the bank. My dress drips in the heat of the sun.

I'm home and I'm still shaking so hard that I can't keep the bag in my arms straight. At least my dress is mostly dry – hurrying along the dirt path home with my dress wet and cold reminded me too much of that – that *thing*.

"ANNIE!" is the yell I hear as soon as I get through the door. They must've heard the screen door. "GO HELP YOUR COUSIN!"

Daddy never says what I need to help Sherman with. I don't bother asking him. I know where he'll be.

I swallow, hard, like I'm trying to eat a ball of grain. I put down the bag, walking halfway up the stairs and hovering anxiously; I see the shadow of Daddy in the bedroom, pipe-smoke curling around the scratch of his whiskers. "Daddy...?" I tried.

"Downstairs," he mutters. I think I see the shine of his eyes. Ours is a dark house.

"Daddy, something happened."

He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't go off on me either. I take that as a good sign, for better or worse, because I need to get this story out of me. "I went down to the creek."

Another puff of his pipe. "And?"

"I went down to the creek and there was a monster."

I heard him exhale through his nose, a snort like a hog – short, final. "No y'didn't," comes after, like the first time I told him about—

"It hurts, Daddy," I say, clutching at my stomach, and it's not a lie. It's not a lie.

"Annie," he says, "we have to keep on. For your mother, 'til she gets better."

I dip my chin. "Yeah," and it comes out small like a sigh.

"So go down and help your cousin," he says, shifting a little on the bed, already looking around for his tobacco.

So I go down to the dark of the basement, the creeks in my heart dry, the monster at the bottom surely starved.

I step out the next day. I get told not to go too far. But I keep walking, and walking, and walking 'til I get to the creek. I thought

maybe I dreamed it, but I always hope I've dreamed the basement and the Godless things down there. My face feels numb. I can't cry. I won't cry.

I take my shoes off again, a little further away from the water this time. It's early out, so the sun's not hot enough to make the ground burn me like yesterday. I'm shaking and I don't know what I'm doing here, but I can't not look. I hurt. I need a distraction, an ointment for the pain.

I lean down – it hurts when I do that – and touch my fingertips to the water.

Something comes slithering over to me.

"Jesus!" I yelp.

What are you doing here, my child?

A mouthless voice sounds out in my mind, like the radio's wired right into my head. All the hairs on my arms stand up, and there's sweat in places I didn't even know I had. "I..." I trail off, trying not to flinch when a tendril softly jabs at me before retreating.

Child, you have returned here for a second day. What are you doing here?

I don't know what makes me answer the creature. I guess I'm still disbelieving. I guess I finally feel like I have someone to talk to – what a thought! I squash down some of them hysterics when they reach me. "I came to find you," I finally say. My scalp itches in the heat; I forgot my hat.

Why? comes that voice again. *Tell me why.*

I clutch at my stomach unconsciously. "I guess I wanted to know whether you were real," I say, and it comes out like a croak. Frog in my throat? I'm not sure why.

I can't see an eye but I can somehow *feel* one looking at me. And after a long, long time, it finally speaks.

They do not believe you. A splash of water as another tentacle lazily makes its way to float upon the surface of the shimmering creek. *This is not unusual. I have been here before you and I will be here after you.*

A shiver goes through me when it says that, but it's strange – I don't feel all that bad. The water is cool on my feet. The wind's in my hair. Sure, you can fry an egg on my scalp right now with how hot it is, but it's good to be in the sun, out of the dark of the house.

"Nobody believes me," I hear myself saying before I can stop myself.

Are you a liar, child?

My bottom lip trembles. "N-No sir," comes out before I can stop it.

Sir?

"Well, y-you're older than me, so-"

I am no male. I am no human.

"Sorry..."

A splash. A gentle tap of a tentacle, less shocking this time. It's almost like this thing is... making me feel better? Or trying to.

Do not be sorry, child. There is no need to be sorry.

A week later, and the sun is as hot as it was, if not hotter. I find it makes it harder to think, and the creek all the more an escape. No matter how long the sun beats down on it, the water is always cool and clean, like it's inviting me in.

The creature, it's not asking for much, really. It seems to like our conversation. I find that I do, too.

Tell me the story again.

I kick my feet lazily in the water, making sure not to kick it. I don't even know if it *can* get hurt like normal, but I still want to avoid hurting it if I can.

I know what it's like to be hurt by someone you trust. And I think we kinda trust each other now.

I clear my throat. “Once upon a time, there was a girl named Goldilocks...”

I burst out the basement door. I gasp, I vomit.

I try not to vomit anymore because it means I’ve gotta clean it up.

“ANNIE, WHAT’S THAT NOISE?” Daddy shouts down like he doesn’t know, *like he doesn’t know*.

I should answer, *yes sir, no sir, it’s nothing, Daddy*. Something in me won’t give. I lay on the floor a while instead, with the dustbunnies and the silverfish, next to my mess.

“There’s a monster,” I say after me and the creature have been quiet a while.

A ripple under the water. *Is it I?*

“No, no.” I say the next part a little quieter, like someone is going to jump out of the bushes at me – at *us* – and say they’ve been listening in the whole time. “There’s a monster in my basement.”

Tell me of this monster.

I swallow. I get this wave of wanting to sink under the water, where it’s dark and cold and I can’t hear or speak to people no more. “It’s my cousin,” I say finally. “He’s staying a while.” A long, long while.

I too have quarrelled with my kin. It feels like the whole creek sighs. *Now I am the only one left.*

I feel another wave of something. “What’s that like?” I mumble.

Silence. Still water.

I pick at the lace on my dress. Mama made it out of a flour sack. It’s too small for me now. I wish she’d taught me how to sew better before she went so far away from us.

I know now what it means to be truly alone. To know that one day, when the rivers run dry, when Earth is collapsing as a dying star, there will be no-one but I to witness it.

“Th-that’s blasphemy.” I don’t know what makes me say it. I cuss, I spit sometimes. And the family hasn’t been to Church in a long, long while.

I bow to no God. There’s something final about the way it says that, so I let everything go quiet a while.

“I made a friend, Mama,” I say, setting the porridge down on the nightstand. I know I won’t get nothing from her, but Daddy says it’s important to try.

She looks so... not real, lying there. She’s thin, but not just thin. She’s waxy, too, and has these weird bumps and lines all on her skin. I don’t like Sleeping Beauty – nothing’s pretty about living like this. Even if she’s still pretty. She’s Mama, she’ll always be pretty. I reach for the spoon, trying to make sure my hands don’t shake none.

Daddy’s gone somewhere. Sherman’s out on the porch.

“They listen to me,” I go on to say as I try to feed Mama. “They really listen. I guess... I didn’t realise I needed it so much.” I blow on the spoonful of porridge to cool it down some. “Maybe it’s like with the Catholics. They need to get it all out.”

I swallow. “My friend knows all these things,” I went on, “but I can teach ‘em things too. It makes me feel smart,” I say, laughing. “Imagine that. Annie, smart.”

I want her to laugh with me, but she just keeps on breathing those shallow breaths.

I wish, I wish so *hard* sometimes that I could go to school, but I can’t.

When she’s taken some porridge, I know it’s time for me to

go. I get all teary-eyed if I'm in here too long and Daddy says Mama wouldn't wanna see me cry. "I'll see about getting some broth up later," I say, running my hands over my sack skirt. It'll be thin broth, but better than nothing, I guess.

Whistling. A smooth, rich sound like too much chocolate. I tense up all over because I just *know* it's coming from the porch outside. It aches, inside me, like it's reminding me of what might come my way.

My hand thrusts out and I stuff a spoon full of porridge into my mouth. I made it too sweet. There's porridge lumps already sitting there in my throat, and the tears are coming out before I can stop it.

"I love you Mama," I say with sticky gums.

The sun is setting, child.

"I don't wanna go home..."

You still quarrel?

"He hurts me."

How does it hurt?

So I tell 'em.

Abomination.

That's what it says to me. Fire and brimstone. I shiver and shake like I have a fever, but then a milky white eye bubbles up from the water and I can *feel* that it's fixed on me. It reminds me of eggs.

Not you. You are not the abomination, child.

So I calm some after that, after seeing its eye.

There's a new preacher in town – I know 'cause I can hear the singing and it hurts! That thing inside me, that thing that lets me know I'm dirty and wrong and no good, it hurts more than ever when I hear sweet voices on the summer breeze.

I feel like I'm not worthy of the wind touching my skin today.

But it doesn't matter, 'cause I'm on my way down to the creek. Sherman didn't want me to go, so Daddy didn't want me to go, so Mama didn't want me to go, some kind of sad puppet with Daddy and Sherman on either side of her, pulling on her strings. *"She wouldn't want you to go."* I pinch my skin. What do you know about what Mama wants, Daddy? She don't speak none, not even to me.

But maybe... Maybe that's marriage.

Would Sherman marry me? The thought makes me want to die.

The singing starts to fade away as I get further off the path. Maybe the travelling preacher will pull up to our door and knock while I'm out. Maybe a preacher can save my cousin. *Abomination. Abomination. Abomination*. The word rattles around my head like a bucket of feed.

I kick a twig across the ground and it splinters.

Hell, maybe we're both just mixed up inside. Maybe this is how it's supposed to be, maybe it's just another way a woman takes care of the house, the people *inside* the house—

"What're you doing here?"

So my whole body braces for a hurricane.

"Hey." A gentle voice, a hand on my neck. "Why're you out here, Annie?"

I can't stop shaking, because I thought I could accept it but – I'm sick. He's sick. We're both Damned and I never want him to touch me ever again, even with kindness.

"Answer me." His grip on my neck gets stronger. I don't

turn around, can't turn around.

"Sherman," I gasp out.

"You have to come home with me now. You have to be a good to me."

I feel it in my stomach, I'm gonna vomit, I'm gonna...

Scalding piss runs down my leg like a river and I can feel him sighing, stepping. "...Just a little girl."

And for some reason only God knows, that's what does it.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" I'm crying. I pull, and I kick and I shake him free but he just snarls like an animal or something and kicks my behind. It hurts. I fall to the ground, making my own animal noises, *please, please, Oh God, oh God* like someone's died, maybe I've died and this is it—

"You're coming home with me, where you belong," he says and he seethes with it like there's fire behind his eyes. Fire and brimstone. He lunges towards my foot, a sopping wet and stinking shoe coming off in his hands before he grabs hold of my ankle. This feels like a death, I'm sure now.

One last gasp – I flop about like a catfish and wriggle myself free.

He's screaming something but I'm crawling, my other shoe coming off as I go, until I'm running, my soles burning on the midday ground.

My ears are ringing. I can hear the cry of my father. The sobs trapped in Mama's chest. My thighs are wet. I see a flash of blue. I see some kind of freedom.

"I once was lost, but now am found..."

And I jump.

We feel better, now we're one.

It was hard at first. To move in one body, to flow as one being. At least we could eat as one. Sharing a meal is an important part of our bond. We taught each other the ritual of it.

Tiny little man. The way he bleated to defile one last time was nothing short of repellent. But his guts exploded pleasantly. He painted the ground like the heavens. The smell in the heat sung to the flies but he was ours to enjoy.

We made it last. Our arms reached inside his dark and mordant places and pulled out treasure troves of his vessel. Prolapse after prolapse. Symphonies of sphincters. Sweet meat.

We will never go back to that dark house. We will consume it, rot and all. We will never be touched again; one flesh, as it should be.

We will speak without touch, without lips to form words. We want for nothing in this way. We will not be violated, not even by each other. And when the world collapses as a dying star, we will see it with our own eyes and know that we face this end together – and it is ending. One moment at a time.

But until then?

Conversations.

Askin' Wayne

Over the past year, my son ("Patrick") has become close friends with a classmate, and our families now spend a fair bit of time together. We're atheists, while they're devoutly Christian, something we've always tried to navigate respectfully. When I mentioned we weren't religious, they invited us to church. I declined politely, but the invitations haven't stopped.

Recently, the parents invited Patrick to Easter service, followed by Easter brunch at their home. As always, Patrick is excited to spend more time with his friend, but we've made our beliefs (or lack thereof) very clear and I feel this invitation is both an overstep and a subtle way to manipulate our son. My husband is approaching the issue in good faith and claims I may be overreacting.

I don't want to create tension or affect our children's friendship, but I'm uncomfortable with the repeated invitations and religious framing. Am I right to be worried that they're trying to indoctrinate Patrick? Even if they're not, how can I clearly set boundaries without seeming dismissive or disrespectful of their beliefs?—*OH WE OF LITTLE FAITH*

In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, you've proudly and willfully chosen to deny the existence of a metaphysical reality. While it's likely because you and your family are a pack of gormless dullards – you are writing to an advice column, after all – it's a principled stance to take in a world saturated with the evidence of demiurge's divine design: the **Scrub Daddy**. The **Mister Clean Magic Eraser**. **Scotchgard**. Tell me: in a godless world, would these products even exist? Would they be easily available at your local **Harris Teeter**? Would Williams Thomas Harris and L. Teeter have even *met*?

Harris Teeter

PAID ADVERTISEMENT

It's clear you have no interest in the teleology of affordable, friendly supermarket chains and other such weighty philosophical concerns, and I don't blame you. Under no circumstances should a child be raised to believe their dying grandparents will amount to anything but a few ounces of soot in a brass pot, or that their escaped Weimaraner will be waiting for them in some Mickey Mouse version of heaven. In fact, you can tell them their Uncle Wayne has been to the realm where Mister Mouse keeps his captured souls, and it's no heaven! (They're ensorcelled within a massive obsidian obelisk stored deep under Orlando. If you get the chance to see it, try to find the hidden Mickey!)

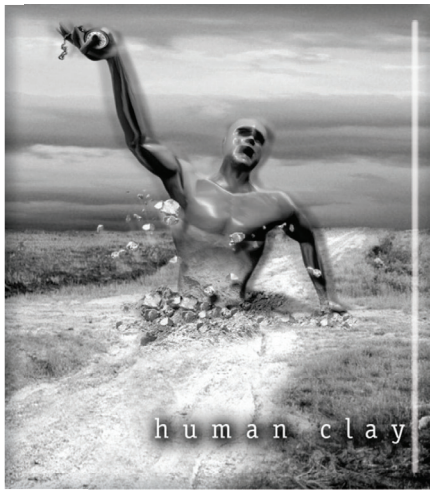
Are you familiar with the phrase "know your enemy"? Coined by right-wing philosopher Zack de la Rocha in his song of the same name, it means to know and understand your enemy or opponent. You'll do well by finding out which branch of this Jewish cannibal cult these people belong to. You might be surprised to learn there are as many as five branches of Christianity: Catholics, Mormons, Pentecostals, Unificationists, and Osmonds.

While these all may appear to be afflicted with the same kind of madness, you'd be surprised at some of the differences! Catholics are burdened with ever-present guilt over not eating enough fish. Mormons can only bathe in large communal cisterns underneath their gilded temples. Pentecostals cover themselves in snakes to symbolize their savior's scaled phallus, while acolytes of the Unification church embody Jesus of Nazareth's penis through their impressive stockade of assault rifles. The Osmonds are notorious for protesting the funerals of veterans and homosexuals.

Regardless, all those who adhere to Jesus's teachings are dangerous, deeply unstable lunatics and should be approached with caution.'

"Easter" itself is one of their most unsettling traditions: followers celebrate the brutal state murder of their Christ figure (one coincidentally named "Jesus Christ") and his subsequent resurrection by a cadre of necromancers using symbols appropriated from pagan fertility rituals, such as rabbits, eggs, and **Cadbury** brand crème. In their sickening corruption of Ostara, families impregnate the youngest female (of child-bearing age) in the hope that a *new* Christ figure will pop out around late December. Micro-cults typically form around these "Christmas babies," leading to smaller, more extreme sects like the Presbyterians and Hobby Lobby. It's in this tradition that 'indoctrination' becomes 'opportunity.'

I warmly encourage you to allow Patrick to join their yearly Easter orgies. Even if his seeds aren't currently ready for fruiting, you're opening yourself up to the golden possibility that these maniacs would prefer to avoid inbreeding and allow the next Church of the Nazarene, Shepherd's Rod, or multiplatnium rock-and-roll sensation (DC Talk, Creed, Lamb of God) to blossom from your child's loins.



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A fair warning: Christians *will* attempt to drown him as a part of their initiation ritual, so I'd advise signing him up for swim lessons at the local YMCA to build lung strength. If he survives, you'll have a clear path to giving him the greatest gift a parent could give: a group of gullible dolts to provide him and his offspring with adoration, devotion, and free labor. (Also, since your grandchild's birthday will be on and around Christmas, you'll save money on gifts!)

If you'd rather establish safe and stable boundaries, I return to the timeless wit and wisdom of Zack de la Rocha: "Rally 'round the family with a pocket full of shells." With a little ingenuity (and a trip to **ACE Hardware**), a pocketful of 10-gauge buckshot shells can yield a surprising number of improvised landmines. Nothing brings a family together like a fun crafting project!

Whichever path you choose, be proud of yourself: you've made the correct decision to raise your child with no moral or metaphysical framework. As the father of a dangerous cult leader or a middle manager at a **Dupont** plant, Patrick will be unencumbered by shame as he exploits and imposes his will on others. There's no greater gift a parent could give.

"Waxen" Wayne

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WITH PURCHASE OF *WAXEN*

WAXEN is a quarterly, cooperative effort. All of our contributors are compensated and retain the rights to their work.

Need advice? Send your darkest dilemmas to **waxenwayne@gmail.com**.

Find us at **waxen.org** and **@readwaxen**.

To our friend **'R.'**—

No, we cannot help.

You do not need help.

Do not panic. **It soon will bloom.**

Dear Editor,

I think they're following me. I checked my schedule after clocking into work last week and the calendar print-out had these weird symbols in each box. Even the names were messed up. It was a bunch of garbled up text, like someone rolled around on the keyboard. [*Ed; see next page.*]

I tore it off the bulletin board, went to my manager and shoved it in his hands and said "what the fuck is this?"

He looked at it for a minute and handed it back. "What are you talking about"?

All the symbols were gone. It just looked normal. I didn't say anything else to him, I just walked away and started doing my thing.

I really, really wanted to just...forget about it, but for some reason I took it home with me that night. I threw it on the kitchen table next to a stack of old mail, had a beer or two and went to bed. When I woke up the next morning there was a piece of paper sitting on my bedside table. It wasn't there the night before. Like, at all. It looked like someone scribbled on it, but when I looked at it closer it was a message. It said "look again".

I freaked the fuck out, ran to the kitchen table and looked at the schedule. I couldn't fucking believe it. The symbols were back, the names were messed up, but this time there was something else. Someone wrote a bunch of instructions on it and drew the same seal from what I sent you last time.

I don't know what to do. I thought sharing this stuff with you would make it better, but I think it made everything worse. Can you help me?

—*R.*

Sbhit Scljhwyui;le

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Prepare with the banishing rituals of
Do pranayama excercises for a min
from the base of your spine to your
a pearl resting on your tongue. Then, T
the mantra: IA MA TE HAMA TE. Do th
IN to the pearl. Once done, bury the
Place it is burried, like a Cobr

the pentagram and hexagram, Followed by the Middle Pillar.
minum of 15 minutes, imagining each breath rising
mouth. As you finish your exhale, imagine the breath becoming
ear off one of these symbols and hold it in your hands while chanting
nat for at least 11 minutes. Each word should feel like its being blown
symbol in dirt. Spit the pearl out of your mouth onto the
a. Give the sign of silence. Start with the first symbol.

Do this every day.

BEV AND BOB WOULD LIKE TO THANK WAXEN'S CONTRIBUTORS FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR WONDROUS AND FRIGHTENING GIFTS WITH THE WORLD:

Niki Bonneau is a tattoo artist and painter from Hinton, Alberta. Her dark, surreal work is influenced by real-life experiences and human connection. Find more of her work on Instagram at **@isolationtattoo**.

John Jeremiah Lee is a Cambodian-American writer; "New Revelations" is his first published piece. He enjoys cycling and going to the beach.

Blessing us again with his considerable talents as an artist and zine-maker, **Tanmoy Kayesen** is a Mumbai-based creator who you should certainly follow on Instagram (**@the_cray_esen**) and Reddit (**r/tanmoykayesen**).

Mark Towse is an English author based in Australia. If you think it's too late to start writing, he kicked off his career at forty-five and currently boasts over 200 anthology credits, fifteen novellas, and three novels. His latest, *The Sound of Suffering*, is an Amazon bestseller.

Vermont's **Elle Burnett** is a writer and historian whose interests lie in the intersections between place, social memory, and the layers of asbestos packed between. She's been featured on the Studio Flash Fiction Podcast and you can find her and her two cats on Instagram (**@skelet.elle**).

Dark is a self-taught Brazilian artist whose manga-inspired, black-and-white horror illustrations depict a bevy of strange, dark, and grotesque female figures. Find her on Instagram at **@darkning.arts**.

A lifelong appreciator of the weird, writer/illustrator **Marigold Rowell** resides in its stateside capital, Los Angeles. Her stories have appeared in publications such as Gnome and Bone, The Horror Zine, and Suffering the Other. You can find more of her work at **marigoldrowell.carrd.co**.

Daniel Roop's speculative work received an Honorable Mention in Best Horror of the Year Vol. 17, and has been featured in publications including Apex Magazine and Pseudopod. "The Whitworth Shearing" will conclude in our next volume.

Brad Kopman is a dark surrealist based out of Philadelphia. His illustrations and paintings draw from the brackish depths of the collective unconscious and can be found on his Instagram (**@bfkworks**) and purchased on his Etsy shop (**BFKWorks**). Good luck deciding which prints to buy.

Hailing from a 130-year old farmhouse in North Carolina, **Michelle St. James** is an author and artist whose nightmarish work has been featured on the cover of more publications than we can list. Her art and stories can be found at **stjames-art.com** and **shellstjames.com**.

If you find yourself in the Midlands of England, try to catch a show by writer and performance poet **Laura Jane Round**. You might also try her website (**laurajaneround.co.uk**) and Instagram (**@laurajaneroundwriter**) if you'd prefer to save on airfare.